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# REPRESENTING THE LIFE COURSE OF A NINETEENTH-CENTURY AQUATIC ENTERTAINER THROUGH DIFFERENT MODES OF EXPRESSION

*UMA REPRESENTAÇÃO DA VIDA DE UMA  
ANIMADORA AQUÁTICA DO SÉCULO 19 ATRAVÉS  
DE DIFERENTES MODOS EXPRESSIVOS*

*UNA REPRESENTACIÓN DE LA VIDA DE UN  
ANIMADOR ACUÁTICO DEL SIGLO XIX A TRAVÉS  
DE DIFERENTES MODOS EXPRESIVOS*

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## ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century development of swimming for women was stimulated by the public appearances of professional female natationists who performed in endurance events, exhibited and raced in swimming baths, and displayed ornamental swimming skills in music hall tanks, aquaria and circuses. These aquatic promotions were significant features in the Victorian sporting and entertainment landscape and by the end of the century, working class 'naiads' and 'mermaids' were performing before all social classes. This paper explores the practices of these women through the life course of Agnes Beckwith, the leading female natationist of the period who appeared throughout the United Kingdom, Europe and America, where her performances stimulated several imitators. This paper diverges from previous scholarly work on Agnes, characterised by its traditional empiricism, in adopting two different modes of expression, an archival-based biography and a creative writing piece scripted in the form of a dialogue between Agnes and her father. This fictional exchange covers the period between 1875, when Agnes undertook her first public endurance swim in the Thames, and her father's death in 1898. In taking this approach the authors are making tentative steps towards experimentation in historical writing and exploring the different ways in which sporting biography might be represented. The hope is that other sports historians might take up the challenge of thinking more creatively about the ways that their work might be reproduced so that the field of sport history can be further developed.

## KEYWORDS:

Agnes Beckwith. Natation.  
Archives. Photographs.  
Creative History.

## RESUMO

O desenvolvimento da natação feminina no século 19 foi estimulado pelo surgimento de nadadoras profissionais que participavam em eventos esportivos, exposições e piscinas públicas, além de apresentar sua destreza aquática e coreográfica em aquários e circos. Essas divulgações aquáticas desempenharam um papel significativo nos âmbitos do esporte e do entretenimento na época Victoriana e, no final do século 19, as "náiades" e "sereias" de classe operária se apresentavam para públicos diversos. Esse artigo investiga as práticas destas mulheres através da vida de Agnes Beckwith, a nadadora mais proeminente do período, que se apresentou por toda parte do Reino Unido, da Europa e dos Estados Unidos, onde seus espetáculos incentivaram várias imitadoras. Esse artigo diverge-se de outros textos acadêmicos sobre a vida de Agnes - caracterizados, na sua maioria, por um tom empiricista - ao adotar dois registros diferentes: uma biografia pautada em uma pesquisa bibliográfica e uma escrita performática em forma de um diálogo entre Agnes e seu pai. Essa conversa fictícia estende-se pelo período desde 1875, quando Agnes participou da sua primeira corrida no Rio Tâmisa, até a morte do seu pai em 1898. Ao adotar esta abordagem metodológica, os autores tomam seus primeiros passos hesitantes para uma escrita histórica experimental, para explorar as maneiras distintas pelas quais pode-se reconfigurar a biografia esportiva. Espera-se que outros autores também possam aceitar o desafio de repensar, de forma mais criativa, os meios pelos quais o campo da história do esporte se revele.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Agnes Beckwith. Natação.  
Arquivos. Fotografia. História  
criativa.

## RESUMEN

*El desarrollo de la natación femenina en el siglo XIX fue estimulado por el surgimiento de nadadores profesionales que participaron en eventos deportivos, exposiciones y piscinas públicas, además de presentar sus habilidades acuáticas y coreográficas en acuarios y circos. Estas revelaciones acuáticas jugaron un papel importante en los campos del deporte y el entretenimiento en la era de Victo-Riana, ya fines del siglo XIX, las “naides” y las “sirenas” de clase trabajadora se presentaron para diferentes públicos. Este artículo indaga en las prácticas de estas mujeres a lo largo de la vida de Agnes Beckwith, la nadadora más destacada de la época, que actuó por todo Reino Unido, Europa y Estados Unidos, donde sus actuaciones animaron a varios imitadores. Este artículo se diferencia de otros textos académicos sobre la vida de Agnes, caracterizados, en su mayor parte, por un tono empirista, por adoptar dos registros diferentes: una biografía basada en una investigación bibliográfica y una performance escrita en forma de diálogo, entre Agnes y su padre. Esta conversación ficticia transcurre desde 1875, cuando Agnes participó en su primera carrera por el río Támesis, hasta la muerte de su padre en 1898. Al adoptar este enfoque metodológico, los autores dan sus primeros pasos vacilantes hacia una escritura histórica experimental, para explorar las diferentes formas de reconfigurar la biografía deportiva. Se espera que otros autores también puedan aceptar el desafío de repensar, de una manera más creativa, los medios por los que se revela el campo de la historia del deporte.*

## **PALABRAS CLAVE:**

*Agnes Beckwith. Nadando. Archivos. Fotografía. Historia creativa.*





## INTRODUCTION

**SINCE THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY** historical enquiry has been an academic discipline with its own epistemological standards (KALALA, 2012), based fundamentally on an empirical approach, which holds that true knowledge of the world ultimately stems from experience or observation as opposed to speculation or theory. (MACRAILD; TAYLOR, 2004) The process of converting the 'past' into 'history' involves engagement with a multitude of different sources and methods, although these have traditionally focused on finding data, judging the validity of the data, and then accurately presenting the data through an historical narrative. This normally takes the form of a sequential account, or story, of an event or series of events organised chronologically. (LANGE, 2013) This storytelling is the means through which the once real past is related by the historian (KALALA, 2012), who chooses to present who said what, who did what, makes assumptions about why they did it, what agencies and structures operated, and what events were significant. (MUNSLOW, 2007)

However, historians now recognise that there are competing approaches to the past-as-history and that they make epistemological choices which influence how they choose how to gain knowledge about the past. (MUNSLOW, 2007) History is an interpretive discipline and the historical perspective is contested terrain with a plurality of meanings. (VAMPLEW, 2015) It is organic, ever evolving as it responds

to its environment, resulting in a field demarcated by thematic divisions and methodological differentiation. (BLACK; MACRAILD, 2007) Postmodernist scholars have rejected notions of grand-scheme narratives, objectivity, empiricism and the fixity of meaning, leading historians working in the empiricist tradition to become more aware of historiographical issues such as the nature, validity and interpretation of evidence, and the respective reliability of oral and documentary evidence, as well as their own ideological commitments. (SOUTHGATE, 1996) No historian starts with a clean slate, since, whatever the topic, meanings have already been attached to it (KALALA, 2012), and historians 'play creative roles in the production and presentation of history'. (BOOTH, 2005) The forms in which this history can be presented, what Munslow calls 'modes of expression', vary widely. Historical narratives can be spoken, or written, a fixed or moving image, or a gesture, a myth, a legend, a fable, a tale, a novella, a history, an epic, a mime, a stained glass window, a film, a comic, a postcard, a performance, a street theatre, a conversation or a painting. The mode of expression selected by the historian reflects their epistemological, methodological and professional orientation towards how they think they can best know the truthful meaning of the past (content). (MUNSLOW, 2007)

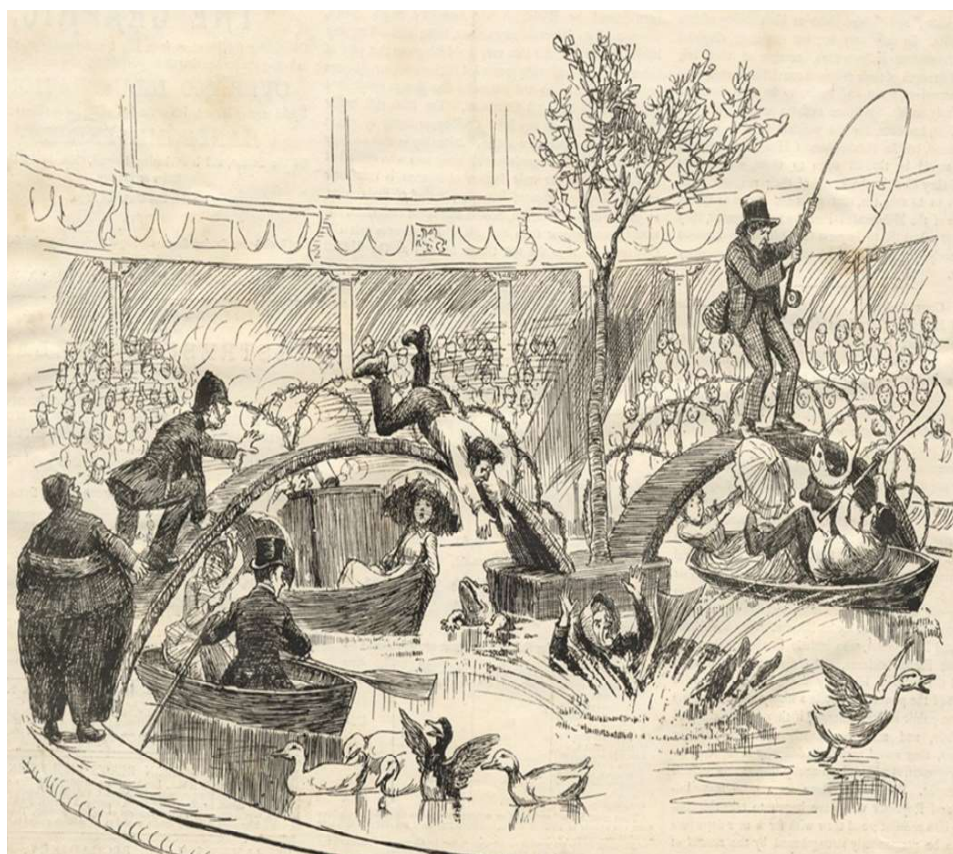
It might be assumed that, as a recognised (often marginalised) sub-field of history, sports history had adapted to the changing nature of historical research and incorporated the innovations and advances made within its parent discipline, but this is manifestly not the case. While 'History' as field has moved on to explore different epistemologies and methodologies the writing of sports history has remained essentially an empirical journey that predicates the authority of the textual mode of expression. (MUNSLOW, 2007) As early as 1994, Beck observed that sport historians had not taken up the challenge raised by the narrative debate (BURKE, 1994), and Hill later noted that there had still been 'no dramatic change in the production or legitimacy of sports history'. (CAHN, 2014) By the start of the twenty-first century, sport history was lagging well behind 'mainstream' history where the epistemological status of history and the use of evidence, theory, and narrative were contested, vibrant, and fundamental issues. (PHILLIPS, 2001)

Vamplew has argued that sports historians should be free to innovate and look at different ways of doing research (VAMPLEW, 2015), while Phillips suggests sport historians either wholeheartedly adopt the key tenets of the postmodern

turn or search for a middle ground. This ‘practical realist’ approach would engage with postmodern critiques, make decisions about the production of historical knowledge, and create new, interesting, and challenging versions of sport history. (PHILLIPS, 2001) What follows is an attempt by the authors to be ‘practical realists’ in their recording, interpreting and representing the life of an aquatic entertainer through different modes of expression, namely archives and creative writing.

## REPRESENTING AGNES BECKWITH

From the aquatic professional’s viewpoint, nineteenth-century swimming (‘Natation’) was as much a branch of the entertainment industry as it was a sport. In aquatic entertainments, often known as water ballet, swimming families introduced female ‘mermaids’, ‘nymphs’ and ‘naiads’, who displayed their skills in ‘ornamental’ or ‘scientific’ swimming, and natational communities used every commercial outlet they could find, at home and abroad, including Swimming Baths, Music Halls, Theatres, Circuses, the Seaside, and Aquaria.



**FIGURE 1:** The Water Pantomime at Hengler's Circus  
Source: *The Graphic*, January 10, 1891.

At the Westminster Royal Aquarium (the 'Aq'), opened in 1876 opposite the Houses of Parliament, the aquarium tanks were used to host swimming displays given by 'Professor' Fred Beckwith, whose aquatic promotions were prominent features in the sporting and entertainment landscape. A critical element in Fred's success was the use of a portable crystal tank, glass-sided and large enough for his aquatic family to display their skills. Over the course of his lifetime, virtually every member of his family was involved, especially his children, first Jessie and Frederick, then Willie, Charles and Agnes, and finally Lizzie and Robert. This paper highlights his daughter Agnes who was consistently at the heart of the Beckwith performances. Fred declared himself very proud of her 'for she's been a credit to my system of teaching, and I am glad I brought her up as a professional lady swimmer.'<sup>1</sup>

1 *Hearth and Home*,  
August 6, 1891, 383.



**FIGURE 2:** Fred Beckwith, son Charles and daughter Lizzie (front) with swimming troupe, circa late 1880s  
Source: Private family collection, courtesy of Beckwith descendants



## TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS

This first mode of expression employed in this paper represents the empirical tradition that is at the heart of sports history by drawing on over twenty years of work in the archives and textual sources from around the world. It is referenced and formatted in the generally accepted academic format for sports history.

Agnes Alice Beckwith, born on 24 August 1861, had a lifetime's association with swimming, as teacher, competitor, and performer, and by the turn of the twentieth century this 'Premier Lady Swimmer of the World' was the most recognizable member of the Beckwith community.<sup>2</sup> The increasing numbers of women learning swimming in this period were ascribed, at least in part, to the popularity of her entertainments and to her reputation as an endurance swimmer, racer and 'scientific' artiste.

When 'Professor' Harry Parker advertised that his sister Emily would swim from London Bridge to Greenwich in 1875 Fred pre-empted him by starting the fourteen-year-old Agnes over the same course in September.<sup>3</sup> Press reports emphasized the vast crowds that lined the banks and bridges or followed Agnes in boats along her route, although not everyone was impressed, and several newspaper reports were critical.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the commercial opportunities, Fred reinforced his daughter's status as the leading female exponent of endurance swimming with long swims in the Tyne<sup>5</sup> and ten miles in the Thames.<sup>6</sup> In July 1878, the seventeen-year-old swam twenty miles in the Thames,<sup>7</sup> and at the Westminster Aquarium in May 1880, Agnes completed a thirty-hour swim, taking all her meals in the water and occasionally reading daily accounts of her swim, while still swimming.

**2** For detailed biography of Agnes and the Beckwiths see Day and Roberts (2019).

**3** *Sporting Gazette*, September 11, 1875, 902.

**4** *John Bull*, September 4, 1875, 601; *Examiner*, September 11, 1875, 1; *Graphic*, September 11, 1875, 246.

**5** *Newcastle Courant*, May 5, 1876, 5.

**6** *Daily News*, July 6, 1876, 3.

**7** *Ipswich Journal*, July 20, 1878, 5.

**FIGURE 3:** Agnes, Carte de Visite, circa 1875  
Source: Courtesy of John Culme's Footlight Notes Collection



Before entering the water, she invited ladies into her dressing-room to confirm that she had no concealed floating supports.<sup>8</sup> *Funny Folks* reported, tellingly, that in remarking to her father that he had in his daughter a constant source of income, the professor had smiled and said that he looked upon her as so much 'floating capital.'<sup>9</sup> Agnes then successfully completed a hundred hours swim in six days in the Westminster Aquarium whale tank in September and later Beckwith advertisements described Agnes as 'Heroine of the 100 hours' swim', although *Moonshine* was less than impressed by the fact that Agnes rested at night.<sup>10</sup>

Endurance swimming by women continually came in for criticism because of the physical excesses involved, but racing proved slightly more acceptable. Although Fred always remained cautious about exposing Agnes to possible defeat,<sup>11</sup> she did compete in three high profile matches against Laura Saigeman in 1879, winning the first contest over two miles for a silver cup at Lambeth Baths on 25 August.<sup>12</sup> The second race, on 15 September in Birmingham, resulted in a win for Laura by one yard, and the third contest, for £50 a side, was swum at Hastings on 22 September,<sup>13</sup> in front of over 1,200 spectators, many of them women. Laura won by over three lengths, getting out of the water seeming little the worse for her long swim.<sup>14</sup> *Sporting Times* noted that the event had a strong commercial component. 'Beckwith pulled it off at Hastings. Many people thought the match he had made for his daughter to swim three miles was a foolish one. Chuckling over the gate money, he said, 'All right! At any rate, I go back with my gal to London a richer if not a *sage man*!''<sup>15</sup>

While endurance events and public racing between women always had its critics, ornamental or scientific swimming was regarded as entirely appropriate for female natationists. Agnes had begun this type of display as part of the family business in 1865,<sup>16</sup> and she became even more central to Beckwith entertainments. At Lambeth in September 1870, Agnes and her brother Willie gave an exhibition of scientific swimming and at another Beckwith entertainment in July 1871 Agnes swam and floated expertly even though still a child.<sup>17</sup> In 1874, the Professor augmented his entourage with other lady swimmers to produce a 'trio of naiads' in Agnes, Laura Saigeman and a Miss Martyr, widely regarded as a positive initiative because lady spectators would want to 'acquire the knowledge and skill which would enable them to do the same'.<sup>18</sup> Agnes was effective as a swimming role

**8** *Reynolds's Newspaper*, May 9, 1880, 8-9.

**9** *Funny Folks*, May 22, 1880, 165.

**10** *Moonshine*, September 25, 1880, 813.

**11** *Bell's Life*, September 8, 1877, 12.

**12** *The Times*, August 26, 1879, 9.

**13** *Bell's Life*, August 30, 1879, 4; September 13, 1879, 2.

**14** *Bell's Life*, September 27, 1879, 5.

**15** *Sporting Times*, September 27, 1879, 5.

**16** *Era*, July 16, 1865, 5.

**17** *Bell's Life*, September 21, 1870, 4; July 22, 1871, 9.

**18** *Bell's Life*, September 26, 1874, 8; November 14, 1874, 8; *Era*, August 30, 1874, 3; October 11, 1874, 3; *Lloyd's Weekly*, June 21, 1874, 5.



model and the ease with which she waltzed, propelled herself in the water with hands and feet tied, and illustrated the best methods of saving life from drowning, highlighted the value of swimming as a healthy recreation for both sexes.<sup>19</sup> Agnes was consistently described as ‘a veritable mermaid’, swimming, floating, diving and turning somersaults through hoops, as well as kissing her hand to spectators in ‘the most bewitching style’.<sup>20</sup>

Agnes was closely associated with the Westminster Aquarium where she had 151 weeks of continuous engagement.<sup>21</sup> In April 1881 a ‘Stupendous programme’ included Miss Beckwith’s grand swimming entertainment, in a show described later that year as so attractive, clever, graceful, and unique that ‘our American and country cousins just now crowding London ought to rush there *en masse*’.<sup>22</sup> In 1885, *Judy* strongly advised readers to visit Agnes at the Aquarium, others suggested that not to see the Beckwiths would be to miss one of the most remarkable sights in London, and, by the end of the 1880s, this ‘instructive’ swimming entertainment featured Agnes, ‘disporting herself in the water with seal-like ease’, assisted by Misses Milly Cranwell and Clifford. Invariably, the swimming annexe was filled to overflowing, for which, according to the *Licensed Victualler’s Mirror*, the Beckwiths deserved the ‘tanks’ of the public.<sup>23</sup>

**19** *Observer*, April 3, 1881, 1.

**20** *Daily News*, May 4, 1881, 4.

**21** *Baily’s Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, April 1884, XLII 290 183; *Swimming Notes*, May 3, 1884, 8.

**22** *Penny Illustrated*, August 6, 1881, 7; *Judy*, October 5, 1881, 148; December 7, 1881, 256.

**23** *Judy*, December 16, 1885, 292; *Licensed Victuallers’ Mirror*, October 16, 1888, 451-452.



**FIGURE 4:** Agnes and her Troupe, circa 1890-1895  
Source: Private family collection  
courtesy of Beckwith descendants



The introduction of lady swimmers had been regarded as something of a novelty in 1874, but by 1886 Agnes was leading her own group of lady swimmers and having little trouble finding engagements.<sup>24</sup> In 1888, Agnes's swimming entertainment appeared at Alexandra Palace, and the troupe was in Hastings for the 1889 summer season, where they gave exhibitions twice daily from May to September.<sup>25</sup> In July 1891, Agnes commenced a three months' engagement at Bournemouth where, assisted by Miss May and Miss Mabel Beckwith, she gave daily exhibitions of swimming, diving, floating and fancy swimming. After spending the Christmas period at the Standard theatre in Pimlico she returned to Bournemouth for the 1892 summer season, where her troupe introduced several new items such as swimming through the figures of a quadrille. In May 1893, Agnes appeared with her pupils as 'Queen of the Waves' at Captain Boyton's Water Show at Earls Court, London, before completing another summer season at Bournemouth, while the 1895 and 1896 seasons were spent in Scarborough.<sup>26</sup> These summer engagements were interspersed with appearances in the music halls, circuses, and at the World's Fair, when one observer remarked on the 'charming appearance' and pretty costumes of the troupe, reinforcing the impression that the appeal of female natationists to many male admirers often had as much to do with their physical appearance as their skill.<sup>27</sup> In January 1897, William Taylor, their business manager, was advertising Agnes and her 'Wonderful Troupe of Lady Swimmers' of between four and eight natationists.<sup>28</sup>

Agnes had married William Taylor in 1882, although she kept the Beckwith name, at least for public performances.<sup>29</sup> Taylor, a theatrical agent was an integral part of the Beckwith community and he accompanied Agnes and Willie to exhibit in America and Canada in 1883, a trip that represented just one of many sojourns abroad for Agnes, particularly to Europe.<sup>30</sup> In Paris, in February 1886, Agnes performed at the New Circus and five years later she was at the Sophienbad in Vienna during May.<sup>31</sup> When she appeared again in Paris in March 1894 in a pantomime called 'the Redhead', she offered 500 francs to anyone able to remain at the bottom of her aquarium without coming to breathe for as many minutes as she did.<sup>32</sup>

**24** *News of the World*,  
October 24, 1886, 8.

**25** British Library *Evan*. 339  
Poster; *Evan*. 2694 Poster;  
*Era*, May 25, 1889, 20;  
September 7, 1889, 17.

**26** British Library *Evan*.  
1273 and 1886; *Manchester  
Guardian*, May 22, 1893,  
5; *Era*, July 4, 1891, 16;  
December 26, 1891, 16;  
August 27, 1892, 13; August  
26, 1893, 13; June 8, 1895,  
20; August 31, 1895, 7; May  
30, 1896, 18; June 13, 1896,  
21; July 11, 1896, 11; August  
8, 1896, 20; September 26,  
1896, 21.

**27** *Era*, December 26,  
1891, 16; May 15, 1897,  
21; January 1, 1898, 22;  
January 21, 1899, 20,  
January 29, 1898, 20, 22;  
*Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*,  
December 24, 1899, 13.

**28** *Era*, January 23, 1897, 29.

**29** Agnes Alice Beckwith  
GRO (1882/marriage/  
March/Lambeth/1d/520).  
Census 1891, William  
Taylor (394/27/12). 1901  
(383/89/3).

**30** *Era*, May 20, 1882, 4;  
*Penny Illustrated*, May 5,  
1883, 279; August 18, 1883,  
10; *Reynolds's Newspaper*,  
May 13, 1883, 8; October  
28, 1883, 8; *New York Times*,  
June 5, 1883, p. 2; *Graphic*,  
October 13, 1883, 370.

**31** *Le Gaulois*, February 19,  
1886, 3; *Gil Blas*, February  
20, 1886, 4; *Le Temps*,  
February 20, 1886, 5;  
*Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung*,  
May 14, 1891, 479; *Neue  
Freie Presse*, May 14, 1891, 7.



**FIGURE 5:** Agnes and William Taylor, circa 1891  
Source: Private family collection courtesy of Beckwith Descendants

Her visits to North America cemented Agnes' international reputation. In Canada in 1883, Toronto papers reported that her aquatic displays had been witnessed by thousands of spectators and the engagement was extended by over a week.<sup>33</sup> Although Frederick subsequently declared in publicity literature that Agnes had successfully completed a twenty-five mile swim from Sandy Hook, New York to Rockaway Pier during her time in America, this is at odds with local newspaper reports. Overall, the visit had been a financial failure and the costs of the American trip were never recouped, heaping further financial problems upon Fred.<sup>34</sup>

**32** *The Intransigent* (Paris), March 1894, 2; *Le Gaulois*, March 11, 1894, 4; *La Lanterne*, March 4, 1894, 3-4; *Le XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, March 13, 1894, 4.

**33** *Penny Illustrated*, May 5, 1883, 279; August 18, 1883, 10; *New York Times*, June 5, 1883, 2; *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, 'The Beckwiths. Agnes and Willie,' September 30, 1883, 6; *New York Clipper*, June 9, 1883, 190.

**34** *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 14, 1883, 337; *New York Clipper*, July 7, 1883, 25.



**FIGURE 6:** Agnes Beckwith later in her career, circa 1906  
Source: Private family collection courtesy of Beckwith descendants



When Agnes returned to America in 1887 to appear in circus, the 'picturesque aquatic expert' presented a more striking picture than anyone else in the performance.<sup>35</sup> Following her appearances with the Barnum-Forepaugh show in New York and Brooklyn, Agnes left for England on 10 May,<sup>36</sup> leaving a legacy that others, such as American natationists Cora MacFarland and Clara Sabeau, who both appropriated the Beckwith surname, took advantage of. Unfortunately for Agnes she was unable to convert her social capital into financial capital and she continued to work into the twentieth century,<sup>37</sup> even though Fred, Willie and Charles had all died before 1900. By 1901, at which point Agnes' troupe of ladies consisted of seven natationists, five of them tank performers,<sup>38</sup> she was living in Southwark with her husband and two of her aquatic troupe and she had her only child, William, in February 1903. William subsequently performed alongside his mother who continued to appear and teach at venues as far afield as Hastings, Dover, and Aylesbury, while visitors to the Manchester Industrial Exhibition during June 1910 were encouraged to visit Agnes's Swimming Performances in 'Old Manchester'.<sup>39</sup> By 1911 Agnes, aged fifty, and accompanied by eight-year-old Willie, was boarding in Hemel Hempstead with Clara Abdale, a long-standing member of her aquatic troupe, and both women were describing themselves as ex-professional swimmers.<sup>40</sup> Agnes married for a second time in August 1916, subsequently living in London and Dorset before leaving for Port Elizabeth in South Africa in 1948, where she died on 10 July 1951.<sup>41</sup>

## AN EXPERIMENTAL REPRESENTATION

While textual representations are recognisable modes of expression to sports historians, experimental representations are few and far between. Alan Munslow, a leading advocate for experimental or 'expressionist' history, starts from the viewpoint that historical 'explanation and meaning' is a property of the history text and, while the past remains the empirical material with which even the experimental historian works, there is no direct correspondence between the past and history, and there is no 'natural' epistemic continuity between them. For Munslow, the explanation of the meaning of past reality results from the functioning

**35** *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, April 2, 1887, 4.

**36** *New York Clipper*, May 14, 1887, 120.

**37** *Daily Mirror* August 8, 1904, 2; September 23, 1904, 10.

**38** *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture*, 'Types of Women Athletes. Miss Agnes Beckwith,' 1901, 188-192.

**39** *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, December 31, 1908, 3; *Manchester Guardian*, June 20, 1910, 1; Census 1911 (RG14PN7747 RG78PN383 RD141 SD1 ED8 SN122).

**40** Census 1911. (RG14PN7747 RG78PN383 RD141 SD1 ED8 SN122).

**41** GRO (1916/marriage/ July/Exeter/5b/174); GRO (1941/death/October / Surrey/2a/443); Principal Probate Registry of England and Wales, Llandudno, March 1942; Manifest List for Union Castle Line, The Carnarvon Castle departing Southampton 31 August 1948; Nazareth House Records.

of narrative, a cultural and linguistic activity that transforms one state of affairs into another and which manifests itself in the case of history through a transformation from a subject of existence (in)to an object for representation. In experimental history, the past no longer appears to speak for itself. (MUNSLOW, 2007)

What experimental history does through its emphasis upon the nature of representation and expression is to challenge the empirical-analytical concepts of objectivity and truth, which remain central to historical analysis. Although the reality of the past is a fundamental constraint on the nature of the history, all historians would benefit by understanding the connections between ‘what is told’ and ‘how it is told’. Experimentalism welcomes plausibility in its narratives over more narrow empirical justification making ‘creative non-fiction’ one of the most disputed kinds of history today. This is writing that may be factually accurate and, therefore, not strictly fiction, but is overtly written for aesthetic as well as explanatory reasons. While some historians still subscribe to a classic realist conception of the writing of history, intending their accounts to be copies (mimes) of what actually happened in the past, abandoning that approach leaves the historian free to invest in a vast range of possibilities with respect to modes of expression. (MUNSLOW, 2007)

Experimental history is about different ways of seeing and telling and there is growing interest in the ‘performative turn’ in historical studies, history theorised as drama, ritual, festival, theatre, and pageant. Some experiments will engage with different modes of expression like experimental film, the graphic novel, dramas or pantomime. (MUNSLOW, 2007) Archives are a key resource for creative writers, helping to develop ideas and an understanding of narrativity, in that all archives allow for some process of interpretation, reinterpretation and creative adaptation. Creative writing within archives can highlight, and even challenge, silence within the archive. What follows is a fictional dialogue, based on archival material, between Fred and Agnes covering the period between 1875, the year that Agnes started her public endurance swims, and Fred’s death in 1898. Creative historical writers also need creative historical readers, readers able and willing to read their history and criticize it as writing. (GOODMAN, 2012) The authors actively encourage their readers to generate a dialogue to help them understand, in particular, the non-cognitive, emotional aspects of the reception of the various forms of historical representation. (FULDA, 2014)<sup>42</sup>

**42** Daniel Fulda.  
Historiographic Narration.  
*Living Handbook of  
Narratology* ([http://www.  
lhn.uni-hamburg.de](http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de)) 25.  
March 2014, 10.

## THE BECKWITHS: A CONVERSATION<sup>43</sup>

**Fred:** Well done daughter. That's one in the eye for Harry Parker and his sister. Good idea of his but glad we got in first. Certainly put you in front of the public. There were thousands of them. We won that £60 wager as well, which should keep us going for a while. Matthew's swim of the Channel has really created interest in this endurance swimming lark, and I think all the family could follow your example.

**Agnes:** Thanks Pa. It wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. Cold, but going with the tide like we did made things a lot easier, although all those crowds in the boats surrounding me on the water were a bit of a nuisance. Good job the police galleys were there to clear the way.

**Fred:** There were crowds all over the rigging in the ships as well. The tide helped that time of one hour, seven minutes and forty-five seconds and at least the water is a bit cleaner now that Joe Bazalgette is getting the sewers sorted out. That new one on the Chelsea Embankment helps and the smell has started to disappear as well.

**Agnes:** Better than it must have been when you were competing in the Thames and winning the Championship of England. I bet it stank! Mind you, I was too busy fitting in my tricks to amuse the crowd and concentrating on my strokes to think about the smell. Still find that sidestroke hard, even though I know it's faster. Guess that's because I've been doing breaststroke since I was three. Having the band helped, especially when they played the tunes I recognised. Took my mind off things a bit but I wish someone had warned me that cannons would be firing from the ships all along the way. They were a bit scary.

**Fred:** All part of the show girl! Think that costume of yours helped a lot. You looked fine in rose-pink lama and your hair tied up with that ribbon. Worth the effort and expense it took to make them, and it definitely helps draw in the punters, especially the men.

**43** Performed by the authors at The British Society of Sport History Annual Conference and Post-Graduate Symposium, University of Worcester, Saturday September 2, 2017, and at The Circus Symposium: Philip Astley and the Legacy of Modern Circus, Manchester Metropolitan University, September 27, 2017.

**Agnes:** Nice to have you and brother Willie in the boat alongside me but it's a shame that ma wasn't there. I know she's blind, but she could've heard the crowds. She's so ill now I don't think she can last much longer.

**Fred:** I know what you mean. Some of that £60 will be going towards the funeral pretty soon, I think. The old girl is on her last legs and can't survive much longer.

**Agnes:** Keep the funeral simple pa. You know what you're like with money. First the pubs, then the post office and then all those bankruptcies. You might be a champion swimmer, but you spend money as soon as you get it and most of it goes to your friends. They'll bleed you dry. You should keep some dosh back for your old age. You don't want to end up in the workhouse or working until you drop dead like lots of people have to.

**Fred:** Don't fuss girl. It'll be OK. Now that more people know who you are, we can use the publicity to sell you and our shows and we might not have to use the crystal tank quite so much. We already have enough bookings in baths and at the seaside to keep us going for a while and we should cash in on this craze for endurance swimming while we can. With a bit of luck, I think that the new Aquarium in Westminster might prove useful. Not sure they'll be able to keep it going as an aquarium and the whale tank would be ideal for teaching classes as well as our family exhibitions.

**Agnes:** Good job you saw those changes coming at the Aq pa. Now that Farini has taken over and the whale tank can be hired we could draw in some of the crowds that already go to see Zazel and all the other sideshows.

**Fred:** Trust your old dad to get it right! Have lots of ideas. Not only entertainments and teaching but we could do some endurance stuff as well. That six-day event we did at Lambeth with Matt Webb got them in through the doors and I think we'll start by having you do a 30-hour swim and then build that up, maybe to 100 hours.

**Agnes:** That sounds like it'll be pretty boring for me. It might help if I could do some tricks and novelties, say like reading a newspaper and having breakfast in

the water. We could also do things like getting women to come into my changing booth to check I'm not wearing corsets. Easy to do and costs us nothing.

**Fred:** Good thinking girl. Seeing you performing your aquatic stunts will help attract women to our teaching classes. More and more of them want to learn to swim now and it's already becoming very popular. We can sell the life-saving angle as well if we display your skills by putting on some demonstrations.

**Agnes:** Might be good to show me saving a man to show what a woman can do. Perhaps we should get a lot more women into the troupe as well. I'm not sure I can do it all on my own.

**Fred:** Well, we already have Olivette and Laura and I could easily recruit some more. There're plenty of them out there, especially young ones. Willie's new wife Emma can swim a bit too and she would be cheap. She is family after all.

**Agnes:** Talking of new wives, how are you getting on with Elizabeth? She seems to be causing you a lot of trouble.

**Fred:** Don't remind me! She turned a bit queer after your stepsister Lizzie and stepbrother Bobbie were born. I'm told that happens with some women apparently. We've now separated for a while and I might even end up having to divorce her if she keeps treating me this way. She's a drunkard who has pawned my stuff, kicked me in my private parts and threatened me with a knife and a poker. She scares me!

**Agnes:** Oh dear! Poor old pa. Ma wouldn't have been so unkind. Hope I don't have any problems when I get married. It's a shame though since Eliza is such a good swimming teacher and her piano playing really helps our shows.

**Fred:** True but best to concentrate on trying to make some money for now. We are well booked up for our seaside appearances and we have some decent theatre and music hall engagements. With my position as Baths Master at Lambeth we should do alright. I'm hoping to make some cash from my betting tents at the racecourses too.



**Agnes:** That's true. Maybe we can go abroad again. I remember us taking the glass tank to Paris when I was younger and appearing with Willie as Les Enfants Poisson. That was fun and showed the Frenchies what we can do. Perhaps we should go to America pa. There seems to be lots of opportunities there for performers like us.

**Fred:** Another good idea girl. I can have a chat with Bill Taylor. He's done a pretty good job managing the gymnasium during the winter at Lambeth Baths as well as our engagements around the country and I know he has some contacts in America after going there recently with George Fern.

**Agnes:** I like Bill. He treats me like a lady and if he asked me to marry him I would, but only if you agreed of course, pa.

**Fred:** It'd be useful to have him in the family and if that's what you want then that's good news. You know I can't deny you anything. You always twist me around your little finger. Your mother knew that, God rest her soul.

**Agnes:** First day as a married woman! Thanks for the wedding pa. Must have cost a lot but it was really nice, and I'm pleased that lots of our friends were there. Bit strange having two second names now but keeping Beckwith for all my swimming appearances makes sense and means that people know who I am. After all, no-one's heard of Agnes 'Taylor'.

**Fred:** We've made lots of money from our time at the Aq and it's only right that some of that should be spent on my favourite daughter. Understand Bill is planning to take you and Willie to America to see if we can make even more dosh.

**Agnes:** We're leaving soon, I think. Bill's already organised some exhibitions and he wants me to do some endurance swims as well. Willie's not too keen on going though.

**Fred:** You know how much Willie likes London, but he'll come around to the idea. Get there safely and let me know how it goes.

**Agnes:** Hello pa. We had a good trip out here on the City of Berlin but only after it had been mended in Ireland. I liked being on the sea and I like America too.

The crowds are really enthusiastic, and our shows are something new for them. They're so keen we've had to extend our exhibitions in some places. That 20-mile swim I tried from Sandy Hook, New York, was hard though and the weather was so rough I had to give up in the end. We didn't get the tides right and, although I didn't want to give up, Bill and Willie made me get back on board the Bonny Doon.

**Fred:** No need for anyone to know that over here girl. I shall just tell the newspapers that you completed it. No-one will know any better and it will be good publicity. When are you coming back?

**Agnes:** I think we could stay here forever if we wanted to and there would be plenty of work, but Willie wants to come back to go to the races. He's determined not to miss them. It's a shame since I don't think we've made much money at all.

**Fred:** You better have had! I didn't go to all the expense of sending you over there to lose money. I hope Bill's not keeping any lolly under the table for himself.

**Agnes:** Oh, don't be like that pa. Everything's been so expensive here and on top of that, Willie couldn't persuade any Americans to swim against him for wagers. Our American agent Dick Fitzgerald was useless, so it wasn't Bill's fault. Tell me what's been happening back in England.

**Fred:** It's going quite well at the moment. Lizzie is popular in our shows and seems to be good at playing to the audience. We are still getting our regular engagements and picking up some new ones as well. I've got you a turn in Paris and quite a lot of the circuses are interested in having you perform. Barnum and Forepaugh want you for their giant extravaganza at Madison Square Garden so you'll be going back to America soon.

**Agnes:** That could be fun. I'll have to get some new costumes made up and maybe see how we can invent some new tricks. I'm looking forward to it.

**Agnes:** You wouldn't believe it pa. Some American women are copying my routines and a couple of them are even calling themselves 'Beckwith'. That Canadian, the so-called Clara 'Beckwith' is bad enough but even worse is that Cora 'Beckwith'.

She's touring all round America in her booths at the showgrounds and claiming that she learnt to swim with you on the 'beach' in Lambeth. The cheek of it! Anyway, how are all our friends back home?

**Fred:** Everyone we know in swimming seems alright. Of course, there're always problems but the Professional Swimming Association is going well. Our meetings and smoking concerts have been jolly occasions and it's nice to see so many of the amateurs joining in. Mind you, some of these so-called 'gentlemen' are no better than they should be. Think as well that there are those who don't like amateurs and professionals mixing in this way and if that Amateur organisation really gets off the ground then we pros could be in trouble.

**Agnes:** I'm sure you can talk them round pa. Everyone respects you. Rothschild is a good friend and your lodge members all support you. We've even had royalty at our shows after all!

**Fred:** One thing I've learnt in life girl is that you can lose friends just as easily as you make them. You should always remember that.

**Agnes:** Had a good time in America pa. The audiences loved my performances and both Willie and Bill seemed to have enjoyed themselves.

**Fred:** I know. Thanks to some friends in America I've seen the reports for your appearances over there. One report described you as a 'picturesque aquatic expert' and talked about that robe of old gold pixels that we had made up so that was well worth the cost. They also described you as 'waltzing like a swan' so you obviously made an impression. I know you're leaving on 10th May and look forward to hearing all about it. It'll be good to have you home and to get you performing here again as soon as possible.

**Agnes:** Plenty of engagements to keep us going pa. I'm all over the place, especially during the summer. It's the travelling that makes it so difficult though. Scarborough to Margate is such a long way, even when we use the railways.

**Fred:** I know but we must keep going if we want to make a living. I'm getting worried that our shows might not be as popular as they were before. The public seems to be getting a little bored by seeing the same old routines and there's lots of competition now from them like the Finneys and the Johnsons. Perhaps we need to do something different if we can.

**Agnes:** Yes. The teaching is going well with all those women wanting to learn to swim and my classes are packed out but these new amateur clubs and the way they prefer racing to exhibitions is starting to make a difference.

**Fred:** I remember the days when it was difficult to find enough opposition for you to race against. That's never been your strength anyway. Set you off over a long distance and you're fine but your speed is not as good as some others like the Johnson girls or Laura. As you know, I had to fix some of those ladies races I put on at the Aq to make sure we won our bets and made some money.

**Agnes:** Then there's those other shows and carnivals in London. They help but they don't happen very often. Mind you, I always like doing them and they're close to home, it's a bit like being at the Aq

**Fred:** The Aq's starting to struggle. There's lots of low life using the place and its reputation is going downhill. We've lost the exclusive rights as well and there's other professors starting to use the tank. That's why we have to keep going out all over England. Good job we still have the crystal tank, which is great for performing in the music halls.

**Agnes:** I know the halls are popular pa, but they are rough places. I always worry about going there. Much better in the circus where the crowds are noisy but there's lots of kids too and things seem much nicer. I loved appearing in the ring in America when I was there. France and Belgium were nice places too.

**Fred:** We can't always choose what we do girl. We have to go where the money is. Think what we need to do is to split up the group so that we can accept more engagements. If you had your own troupe and I got another one together then we could do more shows. Willie and your brother Charlie could do the same. You're

all experienced now and know what to do. Lizzie, Bobby and Emma can help out too as well as Eliza.

**Agnes:** Guess we're already doing that a bit and it's been a success, so it makes sense to do more. I can work with Clara and some of the others as a ladies-only troupe. That might pull in the crowds.

**Fred:** Yes, I think it will. Reckon I'll do more swimming races for amateurs as well. That Amateur Swimming Association still allows them to win prizes and I might be able to make some money from their entry fees.

**Agnes:** Be careful pa. You remember what happened when you didn't come up with the prizes before and people complained. That lost you quite a lot of your friends in the amateurs.

**Fred:** I seem to be losing a lot of friends at the moment. Not sure why. Seems like swimming is becoming much more serious and the kind of thing that we do is now not good enough for some. Things are not going to get any easier and we never seem to have any spare money no matter how hard we work.

**Agnes:** Well, a lot of that's your own fault pa. Everyone knows you're the best swimming teacher in England, but they don't always like the things you do away from the baths. As for money, you've not changed at all and you still waste so much. You've not saved anything and now that you're reaching seventy you've nothing to show for all those years of hard work.

**Fred:** Don't nag me daughter. Something has always turned up. Mind you, I'm feeling my age a bit now and struggling to do all those things in the water that I used to do easily. Losing all my medals and prizes in that burglary has hit me hard and there's days when I just don't want to get out of bed.

**Fred:** Bad news Agnes. Willie seems to have got worse and I don't think he'll get over it this time. All the money that we raised from that benefit at the Canterbury won't be able to help him. He's too far gone. The best that we can hope for is that

his family has something to keep them going for a while. Just as well. I hardly have a penny left and won't be able to help them out.

**Agnes:** Oh pa. The thought of Willie passing away makes me want to cry. He's so popular and, thanks to you, he's been the best swimmer in England for ages. I'll try to get home to see him if I can, but I have so many engagements it might be difficult.

**Fred:** If Willie goes then I don't know what I'll do. Life is treating me so badly at the moment. There is no money and all those people who used to be friends and always wanted my company have melted away. If it were not for you and the boys no-one would be interested in me.

**Agnes:** Take care of yourself pa and try to cheer up. You've not been looking too well lately either and I'd hate you to get ill like Willie.

**Fred:** Afraid it's too late for Willie. He passed over peacefully last night. I rushed over from Hastings, but he had died by the time I got there. His funeral will be later this week and I'm hoping many of his friends will help out with funds since I cannot afford anything much.

**Agnes:** That was a sad day, but it was a lovely funeral for our Willie. The line of gigs, dogcarts and wagonettes following the hearse and four was really impressive and that costermonger's barrow and donkey made a nice finale. He would've loved that, and I've never seen so many flowers.

**Fred:** All thanks to his friends girl. I couldn't afford even a single lily. The way I'm feeling now I think I'll be joining him soon.

**Agnes:** Oh, don't say that pa and try not to worry. You still have some work to keep you busy and remember that big school in Uppingham wants you to do some teaching.

**Fred:** Off there soon but not sure how I'll cope. This rheumatic gout in both my legs means I need sticks to move around now.

**Agnes:** I've just had a message to say you've had a stroke pa and that Elizabeth is on her way to Uppingham. I can't leave my engagement at Hastings and Charlie is too ill to travel. Please try and hang on until I can get there.

**Agnes:** Can't believe that pa is gone and that I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. His funeral at Nunhead was terrible. So few people turned up and it was only the family who were at the graveside. And after everything he's done for swimming too. Now Charlie's taken a turn for the worse and I fear he'll go soon. To lose him so quickly after father would be very hard.



## REFLECTIONS

Nauright believed that by the beginning of the twenty-first century sports historians were reflecting on their field, their collective practices, and their methodologies, and that the field was becoming more fragmented than coherent in terms of approaches to method, sources, theories and analysis. He concluded that 'the breaking down of artificially constructed boundaries of sports history analysis and the expansion of embodied and lived histories points to a vibrant future'. (NAURIGHT, 2014) However, this perspective seems to have been somewhat optimistic. While historians have broadly re-evaluated notions of subjectivity and reflexivity in their research and writing, many, if not most, sports historians have continued to focus on work of an entirely empirical nature (BASS, 2014), an approach considered by some to be a significant obstacle to gaining broader acceptance for their sub-field. (BURGOS, 2014) Many sports historians have not interrogated their own historical methods, despite the revolutions that have occurred in historical methodologies over the course of the last twenty years, leaving sport history 'lagging well behind mainstream history'. (PHILLIPS, 2001) It is quite possible, despite the desire among practitioners for the field to be fully accepted as mainstream history, sports history will remain wedded to its identity as an empirically based, interpretive social science. Sports historians will continue to utilise evidence, no matter its origin, in such a way as to create 'cumulative

plausibility' so that readers are increasingly convinced by the argument (HOLT, 1992), without ever questioning their epistemological position or paying attention to the fact that the historical perspective is contested terrain with a plurality of meanings. For the authors of this paper, dipping their toes into experimental history for the first time, extending beyond the traditional empiricist boundaries offers several exciting opportunities for author and reader alike. Diverse interrogations and interpretations of the source material, presented through different modes of expression, will rarely, if ever, result in a consensus but they will inevitably add to the richness of the sports history landscape.



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